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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 001076

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LITHUANIA TRIES TO EXPLAIN AWAY
BRAZAUSKAS-SIDORSKI MEETING

REF: SECSTATE 185390

Classified By: CDA Tom Kelly for reasons (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Lithuanian Foreign Minister Valionis accepted U.S. and EU Presidency criticism of recent Lithuanian machinations regarding Belarus October 7. His top policy deputy acknowledged that Lithuania was "damaged" by the meeting earlier this week between the Lithuanian and Belarusian Prime Ministers. At the same time, Valionis and his team expressed dissatisfaction with current restrictions against top-level contacts with the GOB. The MFA shared a paper on its Belarusian policy that is part apologia, part self-justification. End Summary.

12. (C) CDA presented reftel points in a joint demarche of the Foreign Minister with the UK Ambassador and EU presidency representative Colin Roberts. Valionis was accompanied by Under Secretary Albinas Januska, the MFA's top policy architect, and MFA Political Director and EU Policy chief Zygimantas Paviolinis. CDA also complained about the MFA's apparent misrepresentation of USG policy on Belarus, telling third parties that the USG surreptitiously approved of its interest in dialogue with the Lukashenko regime.

13. (C) Roberts, speaking on the EU's behalf, noted that the October 4 dinner between Prime Ministers Brazauskas and Sidorski violated the EU ban on ministerial contacts with the GOB. He chided the GOL for its failure to consult EU governments before proceeding with the meeting. He added that other EU governments, including his own, may be receptive to a discussion of the need to adjust tactics in dealing with Belarus.

14. (C) Valionis and his colleagues accepted the reprimands, albeit grudgingly. The FM expressed "regret for any misunderstanding." Januska urged CDA and Roberts not to raise the issue with Brazauskas, insisting that "we hear the message." He accepted Roberts's advice that the GOL lay low in the EU on Belarusian issues for a decent interval, observing that "after this, we are damaged."

15. (C) At the same time, it was clear that the Foreign Ministry still wants to engage the GOB at the highest level. Noting the approach of next year's elections in Belarus, Valionis said the GOL wanted to flood Belarus with foreign observers. The Brazauskas-Sidorski dinner, he said, should be seen in the context of Lithuania's attempt to prevent Lukashenko from having a pretext to keep Western observers out. Valionis also claimed that Sidorski himself was a possible source of intra-regime opposition to Lukashenko.

16. (C) Valionis noted that GOB FM Martynov is occasionally in Vilnius to visit his resident son. Valionis said that he anticipated that his Belarusian counterpart will seek an "informal" meeting. Both Roberts and CDA responded that this would be a bad idea and another violation of the common U.S.-EU approach to Belarus.

17. (C) Valionis provided a "secret" MFA paper providing the GOL's explanation for the Brazauskas-Sidorski encounter. While the paper's authors express regret that "there was not enough time to properly inform partners," they portray the event as a spur-of-the-moment decision by PM Brazauskas, which compelled the MFA to join in. (Vice Minister Petrauskas and Januska attended the dinner for the MFA.) The authors argue that contact with Lukashenko is imperative because "all decisions are taken by Lukashenko himself" and that GOL-GOB contacts will intensify the likelihood of information sharing and defections by key GOB officials. The full text of the paper follows at the end of this cable.

18. (C) Comment: Business and ideological considerations motivate the Prime Minister and his fellow Social Democrats to pursue detente with Lukashenko. The MFA, once a redoubt of opposition to that approach, is at risk of becoming Brazauskas's enabler. We hope that the unpleasantness of the joint USG/UK message will make the GOL think twice about further high-level contacts with the GOB. Regrettably, the MFA paper's defiant tone suggests that our message needs reinforcing at every U.S. meeting with GOL interlocutors, especially at the MFA and with Brazauskas himself.

19. (SBU) Begin text of MFA non-paper:

ON THE VISIT TO VILNIUS BY BELARUSSIAN PRIME MINISTER

1) Contacts with Lukashenko

We thought that under certain circumstances there might be a necessity to make contact with Lukashenko. After consulting US and UK Presidency we came to the conclusion that at this moment such contact would not be advisable and productive. However, we do not preclude that such necessity could arise in the future. It is necessary to underline the specificity of the situation where all decisions are taken by Lukashenko himself. Therefore contacts with other officials cannot replace the contact with Lukashenko.

2) Visit by Belarus Prime Minister

Belarusian exhibition BELEXPO was planned well before. Openings of similar exhibitions during previous years was attended by Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus. During the unscheduled visit of the Prime Minister of Belarus Lithuanian Prime Minister decided to invite him for a private dinner. Lithuanian MFA decided to be present at the dinner.

3) Isolation vs. engagement

We need to be more engaged in the developments in Belarus. This is becoming even more obvious in the light of forthcoming election. It is to be expected that Lukashenko may deliberately seek to escalate the conflict with the West in order to be freer to deliver expected results of the elections (and referendum) and prevent observers from coming.

By meeting Belarusian Prime Minister we intended to not to give any pretext for further escalation of the alleged hostility by Lithuania and ipso facto by the West towards Belarus. We regret that there was not enough time to properly inform the partners.

4) Specific location

Due to geographical proximity between Minsk and Vilnius (170km), an increasing number of Belarus nationals, in particular those related to the opposition, visit Vilnius. They come for meetings, training, seminars and other events. At the same time, these people show more and more interest to settle in Vilnius on a permanent basis. Belarus nationals often acquire real estate, look for jobs, and move their families to Lithuania. Lithuania never intended to create barriers for this.

Members of Belarus authorities are also increasingly part to the same phenomenon. Few examples: 1) Head of National Security Council G. Nevyglas spends a bigger part of his weekend time in Vilnius meeting different people and hanging around in clubs and restaurants; being President of Belarus Football Federation he is particularly active in football related circles; 2) Belarus Minister for Foreign Affairs confidently approached Lithuanian authorities asking job authorization for his son. Similar requests have been received from a number of other high-ranking officials, including from MFA. Lukashenko's son once indicated his intention to visit Vilnius as well.

Those Belarusians wish to keep everything on the private business level and remain in disguise. In these circumstances we cannot avoid contact with these people. This is a very specific situation which creates particular difficulties for Lithuania. We think that the recent visit by Belarus Prime Minister could be related to all these issues. We do not know whether this phenomenon is known to Lukashenko. We know that some cases of "veiled" resettlement to Vilnius is recorded by Belarus KGB.

5) Search for refuge

In addition, Lithuanian authorities have been approached by some Belarus officials who are in position to disclose the crimes committed by the present regime. These officials are high-ranking, therefore the information might be credible and substantial. Their only condition is a guarantee of physical and material security for them and their families which should be provided by Western countries. Lithuania cannot guarantee that. Therefore she has made contact with several EU and NATO members on this matter, however, has not received any response. Of course, we cannot exclude that some of the approaches were provocations.

All in all, Vilnius is becoming a specific place of different type of activity for a big number of Belarus nationals. A similar situation might be in Latvia and Poland.

10. (U) End text of MFA paper.

KELLY